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ABSTRACT

Principals and school administrators across the country know that "quick fixes" are not likely to help when children are not learning to read. For years, teaching reading has focused primarily on curriculum and instruction, but the focus needs to shift from teaching reading to learning to read. This report contends that because children's backgrounds, learning needs, and skills vary, effective reading instruction depends upon three main components: teachers must assess children's reading skills in an ongoing manner; they must use assessment information to customize instruction to individual student needs; and they must participate in ongoing professional development to gain knowledge of reading and reading instruction. The report lists the benefits of effective reading programs; makes recommendations for district leaders in creating effective reading programs; suggests how to build an infrastructure to support effective reading programs; and explains how to manage change in creating effective reading programs. It outlines the framework of the essential cognitive elements of learning to read that teachers need as part of their core knowledge. The paper states that the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) offers such a framework and provides an illustration. It also lists various resource databases, as well as other resources. (NKA)

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Making Sense of Reading.

by Deborah Donnelly

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Making Sense of Reading

Deborah Donnelly

Yesterday you received the results of your school's standardized reading achievement test. The students' scores are down. You were awake all night, wondering why kids don't seem to be learning to read. After all, as principal, you've followed all the district mandates for curriculum and instruction, and you've made good decisions about reading program purchases. You know the teachers are working hard to teach students to read. What else could you possibly do?

Principals and administrators across the country can relate to this scenario. They know that quick fixes are not likely to help when children are not learning to read. The root of the problem is often related to what teachers know and understand about children's learning to read. Many teachers do not have a conceptual understanding of reading. In addition, teachers often do not know what parts of their reading instruction work or do not work, and as a result, why their students' test performances are high or low.

For years, teaching reading has focused primarily on curriculum and instruction. Teachers were expected to follow the teacher's guide and deliver instruction. As long as they were equipped with the necessary curriculum, administrators and the public assumed every child would become a successful reader. This expectation has not been met, however; not every child has become a successful reader.

To address the problem of low reading achievement, principals and district administrators typically have responded by adopting yet another "reading program" in hopes that just the right one will help children learn to read. If the new reading program again results in low reading scores on the achievement tests, as often happens, the cycle begins again. What can principals and district administrators do **differently** to help increase scores on reading achievement tests?

The focus needs to shift from teaching reading to learning to read.

The focus needs to shift from teaching reading to learning to read. This means that teachers begin to weigh the results of their teaching. One question that helps teachers make this pivotal shift is "What reading skills have my students learned?" Depending on the answer, a teacher can determine whether to move ahead or go back and teach again, perhaps, in a different way, based on individual student needs.

Because children's backgrounds, learning needs, and skills vary, effective reading instruction depends upon three main components. Teachers must assess children's reading skills in an on-going manner and use assessment information to customize instruction to individual student needs. In addition, teachers must participate in on-going professional development to gain knowledge of reading and reading instruction.

In a SEDL-sponsored meeting, school, district, and state leaders explored issues that principals and other administrators face in creating and supporting effective reading programs. These leaders acknowledged that no silver bullets exist—developing teachers who diagnose reading needs and prescribe reading instruction according to students' individual needs takes time, and the capacity to deliver significant results on standardized tests requires a district of skilled teachers. Working from this perspective, principals and district administrators can build an effective reading program for their campuses and, ultimately, for their districts.

Benefits of Effective Reading Programs

Effective reading programs produce students who read fluently, comprehend, and enjoy reading. In addition, such students score high on standardized reading tests. When reading programs are effective, students, teachers, and administrators benefit.

- Teachers' participation in professional development about reading and reading instruction helps teachers develop their ability to assess students' reading needs and design and deliver prescriptive instruction strategically.

- Teachers' instructional confidence and integrity bloom over time as they change their practice based on reading knowledge and understanding.

- Student learning becomes more rapid and profound as teachers become more thoughtful in planning and more adept at delivering instruction strategically.

- Achievement scores increase, as teachers become more adept at meeting students' individual needs.

Through teachers' commitment and determination, along with principals' and administrators' thoughtful,

well-planned, long-term support, every child will become the beneficiary of an effective reading program.

Recommendations for District Leaders in Creating Effective Reading Programs

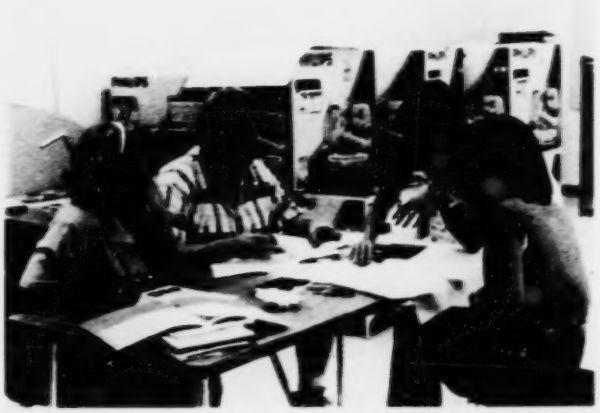
Administrators need to consider local culture and district and school infrastructure in helping teachers change their focus from teaching reading to students learning to read. In addressing these considerations, administrators begin to build effective reading programs.

Understanding the Local Culture

Local culture includes the school community's beliefs and values regarding reading and reading instruction. Principals and administrators need to understand teachers' beliefs and to use this understanding as a starting point for changes in the reading program. Validation of teachers' values and beliefs about reading will result in teachers' more ready to "buy in" to the changed focus from teaching reading to students learning to read. As a result, fundamental, significant changes in teacher practice will occur and remain constant. Principals and administrators can ease these changes in the following ways:

- Initiate the changed focus from teaching reading to student learning by clearly communicating the goals and expectations to all stakeholders.

- Adopt a healthy skepticism about reading research and seeking reliable, trustworthy research to build core knowledge.



Teachers need to hear researchers, master teachers, and each other talk about reading and reading instruction.

Building an Infrastructure to Support Effective Reading Programs

Changing reading and reading instruction requires fiscal and human support from the administration. Teachers need to hear researchers, master teachers, and each other talk about reading and reading instruction. Teachers also need to observe others teaching reading and to discuss their observations. Through observation, dialogue, and reflection, teachers gain clarity about reading and reading instruction. They learn as they apply new ideas to their practice. To this end, principals and administrators can adopt several approaches and strategies:

- Plan fiscal and human resource strategies to support the necessary changes in the reading program, such as providing smaller class size or adding instructional aides to facilitate more individual or small-group reading instruction.

- Create structures that support time for teachers to communicate, observe, and reflect on their reading and reading instruction.

- Develop a strategic professional development plan that includes the creation of study groups. Teachers, principals, and administrators develop knowledge of reading and reading instruction by reading, discussing, and reflecting on professional journals and published works.

Managing Change in Creating Effective Reading Programs

Principals and administrators understand that effective reading programs evolve over time. The evolution from a focus on teaching reading to student learning can either frustrate or excite teachers. The final outcome depends on administrators' on-going attention to teachers' concerns. Principals and administrators manage change successfully in these ways:

- For ease and range of communication with students, parents, and staff, formulate a common language about reading to support changes in the reading program.

- Ask teachers specific questions about what students are learning and how teachers know what students are learning. Principals and other administrators then use this information to assess teachers' progress in changing their focus from teaching reading to students learning to read. This "road map" guides the direction of effective reading programs over time.

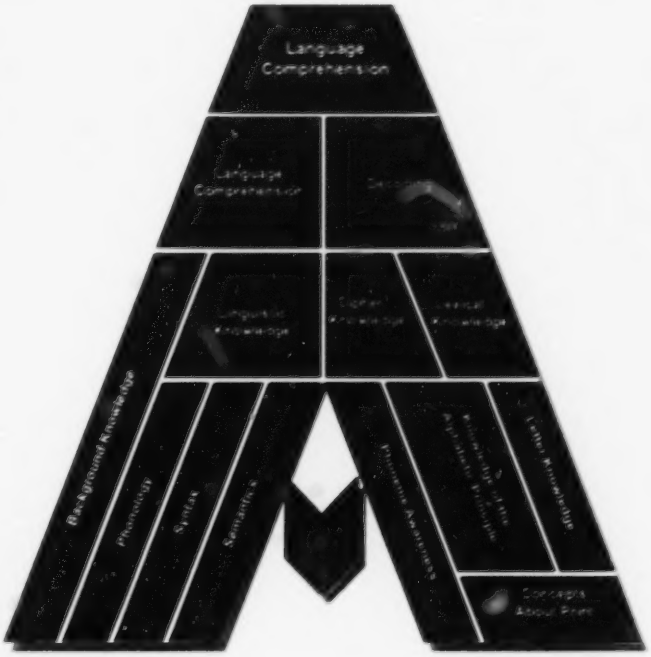
- Articulate and demonstrate administrative support throughout the reading initiative.

SEDL's Resources

As part of their core knowledge, teachers need a framework of the essential cognitive elements of learning to read. SEDL offers such a framework (see illustration below) as part of a suite of resources that support effective early reading instruction and reading programs. This framework, all supporting text, and resources can be downloaded, at no cost, from SEDL's website (http://www.sedl.org). Other resources complement this framework:

The Reading Assessment Database provides principals and administrators information about more than 150 published K–2 reading assessments.

The Instructional Activities Database provides instructional ideas that principals and administrators



The Cognitive Foundations of Learning to Read: A Framework

can use in professional development to help teachers target cognitive elements of reading in their instruction.

The Instructional Resources Database provides principals and administrators references about reading acquisition and reading instruction that could be used in teacher study groups.

The Research Database provides research about reading that principals and administrators can use in building a research base for effective reading programs.

Topics In Early Reading Instruction provides topic-specific papers related to reading and reading instruction principals and administrators may use to build a research base about reading and reading instruction.

Other Resources

Principals and administrators may find the additional resources listed below helpful in building strong foundations of reading knowledge for effective reading programs. While the following list offers only a small sample of the many excellent resources available, it contains works that cover many different areas of reading research.

For example, *Teaching Children to Read, Beginning to Read* and *Preventing Reading Difficulties* provide principals and administrators with current research about reading and reading instruction and will help administrators build a research base for reading programs. *Schools That Work, Classrooms That Work, and What Really Matters for Struggling Readers* provide guidelines for creating effective reading programs.

Principals and administrators understand that effective reading programs evolve over time.

Administrators will find the examples of effective reading programs helpful. *Phonics They Use* and *Phonemic Awareness in Young Children* pertain to reading instruction and could be used in study groups with teachers. Vignettes from these works provide opportunities for discussion and reflection on reading and reading instruction.

Adams, M. J. (1990). *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning about Print.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Adams, M., B. Foorman, I. Lundberg, & T. Beeler. (1998). *Phonemic Awareness in Young Children.* Baltimore, MD: P. H. Brookes Publishing Co.

Allington, R. (2000). *What Really Matters for Struggling Readers: Designing Research-Based Programs.* Reading,

MA: Addison Wesley.

Allington, R. & P.M. Cunningham. *Schools That Work: Where All Children Read and Write.* Reading, MA: Addison Wesley.

Cunningham, P.M. (2000). *Phonics They Use: Words for Reading and Writing.* Reading, MA: Addison Wesley.

Cunningham, P.M. and R. Allington. *Classrooms That Work: They Can All Read and Write* (2nd Ed.) Reading, MA: Addison Wesley.

National Reading Panel. *Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications for Reading Instruction.* (2000). Washington, DC: National Institutes of Health.

Snow, C. E., M. S. Burns, & P. Griffin (Eds.). (1998). *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children.* Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

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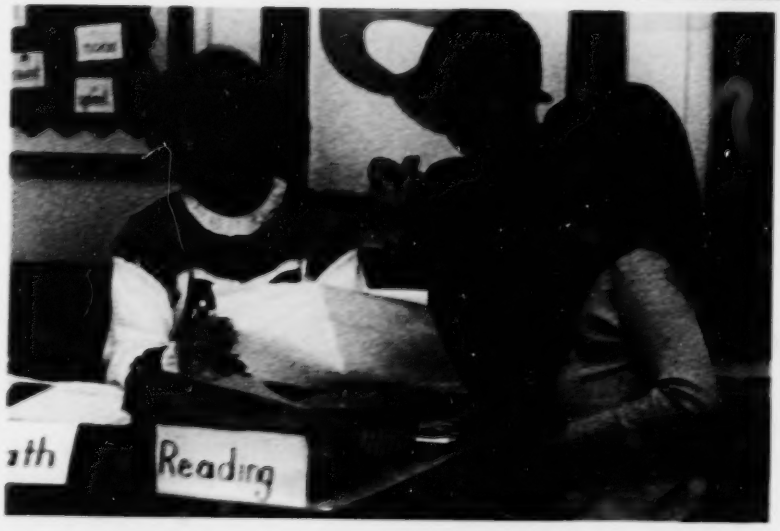

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